

CHAPTER XI

THE LAST STAGE OF NICHIREN'S LIFE AND HIS DEATH

THE prophet had nearly reached the sixty-first year of his age, and for some time his health had been impaired. "Since I retired to this place, I have never been out of these mountains. During these eight years, illness and age have brought me severe suffering, and both body and mind seem to be crumbling into ruin. Especially since last spring, my illness has progressed, and from autumn to winter my weakness has increased day by day. During these ten days, I have taken no food, and my suffering is aggravated by the severe cold in the midst of a huge snow-fall. My body is like a piece of stone, and my chest is as cold as ice."¹ The words are from a letter to a lady who had sent him rice and rice-beer, thanking her for the comfort her drink had brought him. Even a strong man of almost super-human will, like Nichiren, was unable to resist the disease, which was doubtless the result of constant strife and suffering through thirty years of his life. His mind was perhaps preoccupied by his illness, and we have only eleven letters from the ten months preceding his death; yet some of these letters are still in a vigorous strain, and he dwells much on the ideals of his mission, in contrast to the actual condition of the country. He was a prophet to the last moment.

A letter that he wrote to Lord Toki is interesting as embodying Nichiren's thoughts on disease. Toki had written

¹ Dated the eighth of the twelfth month of the fourth year of Kōan (January 19, 1282). *Works*, p. 2082. These statements indicate that his illness was a cancer of the digestive organs.

to the Master about a plague that was raging in the country, and, it seems, had asked his opinion. In reply, Nichiren explained that there were two causes of the plague, one bodily and the other mental, which were reciprocally related, and produced by the malicious devils, who seize every opportunity of attack. The devils are, however, Nichiren says, nothing but the radical vices existing in each one of us from eternity; because both goods and ills are, according to Tendai's conception of existence, inherent in our own nature. Not only diseases, but *all* evils are only manifestations of the radical and innate vices, and there will be no cure until these vices have been extirpated. Then the question is, Why are the faithful believers of the Lotus of Truth attacked by ills or devils? For the solution of this problem Nichiren has recourse to the doctrine of "mutual participation." Just as the bliss of enlightenment in a particular individual is imperfect unless this bliss is shared by all fellow-beings, so ills may attack even the holders of the Truth, even the messenger of the Tathāgata, so long as there exists any vice in the world in any of his fellow-beings. And the believers of the Lotus are perhaps more frequently attacked by ills, because the devils, regarding the *true* Buddhists as their most formidable adversaries, aim particularly at their lives.

Such was Nichiren's thought on illness in general. Applied to his own person, it was associated with his mission to establish the Holy See. So long as the true Buddhism was taught only in theory, as was done by Tendai and Dengyō, the onset of the devils was not so violent as when the theory was translated into practice, as it was by Nichiren. This was the reason why he encountered so many perils as a result of his aggressive propaganda; they were to be explained in the same way as the illnesses which attacked him and his

followers. In other words, the radical vices, and consequent ills, were aroused to rage by Nichiren's propaganda, especially by his preparations for the establishment of the Holy See. When this latter end should be completely achieved, there would be no more room for the vices to have their evil way. Seeing this, the devils run riot, for the purpose of staying the progress of the cause. Thus, Nichiren saw in the raging plague, and also in his own illness, a sign of the approaching fulfilment of his aim. "Does not the growing stubbornness of the resistance show the strength of the subjugating power? Why, then, should not the true Buddhist suffer, not only from illness but from perils of all sorts? Is not Nichiren's life itself a living testimony to this truth?" Thus he wrote in a letter dated the twenty-sixth day of the sixth month, "1282,"¹ which he meant to be his own sermon on illness and death, corresponding to Buddha's sermon in the Book of the Great Decease.²

"Our Lord Buddha revealed the Lotus of Truth on Vulture Peak, during eight years, in the last phase of his earthly life; then he left the Peak, and went northeastward to Kuśināgara, where he delivered the last sermon on the Great Decease, and manifested death." This tradition occupied

¹ Further study has led the author to the conclusion that this letter really belongs in the year 1278, that is, four years earlier than it is dated by the editor of the *Works*. In that year pestilence was raging, and Nichiren was suffering greatly, too, from the illness which finally proved fatal. The statement is left as it was first written, before this conclusion was arrived at, because the difference of date does not in any way affect the significance of what is said in the letter.

² The *Mahā-Parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, a Mahāyāna counterpart of the Pali *Mahā-Parinibbāna*, for which see SBE, vol. xi. The Mahāyāna book on Buddha's death was believed by Nichiren to have been preached subsequently to the revelation of the Lotus.

Nichiren's ideas about the radical vices are derived from Buddha's attitude toward Māra. See Windisch, *Buddha and Māra*.

the mind of Nichiren, who had lived a life of sixty years in thorough-going conformity to, or emulation of, Buddha's deeds and work. On the eighth of the ninth month (October 10), he left his beloved retreat at Minobu, where he had lived for more than eight years. His intention had been to go to a hot spring, but, probably because he was unable to proceed farther, he stopped at Ikegami, near the modern Tokyo, where he was welcomed by Lord Ikegami. The letter he wrote on his arrival at Ikegami, to Lord Hakiri in Minobu, was his last. This letter, dated the nineteenth (October 21), is full of delicate sentiment, and in it he again expresses his thanks for the protection extended to him by Lord Hakiri during more than eight years. He even gives thought to such details as the care of the horse which, with its harness, Lord Hakiri had presented him. Thenceforward, he lay on a sickbed. During nearly a month he lectured again on his old *Risshō Ankoku Ron*, with which he had launched upon his career of conflict and danger. The lectures were unfortunately not recorded, but we can imagine how the prophet reviewed and reinterpreted the most significant document of his whole life in the light thrown on it by his experiences through more than twenty years.

His disciples and followers flocked to his bedside, and the master charged them with the work to be done after his death. Six elders were appointed to be the leaders, and they took a vow to perpetuate the legacy of the master. Besides them, an important appointment was made, of a boy¹ of fourteen to whom was committed the task of converting the Imperial family in Miyako. The motive of the selection is not clear, but whatever it may have been, the boy subsequently proved himself deserving of the Master's confidence,

¹ He was named Nichizō, concerning whom see the Chronological Table at the end of the book.

and became the pioneer of the propaganda in the Imperial capital.

When all had been finished, Nichiren's last hour approached. Early in the morning of the thirteenth day of the tenth month (November 14), 1282, surrounded by his devout followers, and reciting with them the Stanzas of Eternity, the prophet passed away. The stanzas are: ¹

Since I attained Buddhahood,
Aeons have passed, the number of which
Is beyond all measure, hundreds and thousands
Of millions of billions, and immeasurable.

During this time I have constantly been preaching truths,
And leading innumerable beings to maturity,
Taking them on the Way of the Buddhas;
Thus, innumerable aeons have passed, ever in the same way.

For the sake of awakening all beings,
I manifest the Great Decease, by the method of tactfulness;
And yet in reality I never vanish,
But reveal truths by being eternally present. . . .

I am the Father of the world,
The One who cures all ills and averts disasters.
Since I see the mass of men infatuated,
I appear to die, although I am really living.

For, if they saw me perpetually abiding among them,
They might grow slack,
Become careless, and being attached to the five passions,
Finally fall into the woeful resorts.

I am ever watching to see whether all beings
Are faithful to the Way or not;
And I preach to them various aspects of truth,
According to their capacities, and for the sake of their salvation.

Thus, my constant solicitude is,
How can all beings
Be led to the incomparable Way,
And ere long attain Buddhahood?

¹ Cp. Text, pp. 323 f.; SBE., vol. xxi, pp. 307 f.